

The damage doesn't look too bad from the rear.



This shot of the Dodge pickup's cab shows the force of the crash.



The Hornet fared well, despite the truck's damage.



Dodge vs Hornet


By Lt. Paul Brotze

I was five days into my new job as aviation safety officer when the telephone rang one Saturday evening. "Sir, the ordnance truck just crashed into aircraft 312," said the caller. Being pessimistic by nature, I concocted a dozen cataclysmic scenarios in my mind before ever asking for more information. I just assumed someone had been injured or killed, and the jet must have been destroyed.

Aircraft made with composites and surrounded by sensitive control surfaces rarely fare well when going head-to-head with a two-ton, full-size, pickup truck. Was there a fuel spill or fire? The petty officer on the other end of the telephone assured me no one was hurt, and, as far as he knew, the jet was fine. "One more withdrawal from the luck bucket," I thought.

Here's what happened. After arriving early at work for scheduled training, an AO3 had begun his night-check shift with the arduous job of installing centerline pylons and drop-tanks. Toward the end of the shift, he was tired and was eager to complete all work. The AO3 drove a Dodge pickup truck to the ordnance shop to get the drop-tank cables. He left the transmission in park with the engine running, exited the vehicle, and ran into the shop. When he returned, the vehicle had rolled 500 feet down a 1.5-degree grade and struck Hornet 312, which was parked on the ramp.

Two ATs doing wire checks on that aircraft had watched as the truck backed down the ramp. Until the collision, they assumed someone was behind the wheel. Afterward, other maintainers ran over, secured the engine, and began to assess the damage. The bed of the truck had passed beneath the aircraft, just below the tailhook. The cab, which sustained the bulk of the damage, had crumpled like an eggshell when it hit the aircraft's keel. In this Dodge vs. Hornet battle, the news was good for the FA-18. The jet suffered only superficial paint damage to a panel. The hook was examined by AIMD and was returned to service.

As with any near-disaster, we learned a few lessons. The truck's transmission may not have been engaged fully, meaning it could have been human error or mechanical failure. We just don't know. Although the specific cause is unknown, a little timely ORM would have prevented this collision. If the AO3, for one second, had imagined the worst consequence of leaving that vehicle parked on a hill, with engine running, parking brake disengaged, and surrounded by a ramp full of aircraft and maintenance personnel, he certainly would have taken another second to secure the engine and set the brake. It's that simple. 

Lt. Brotze is the safety officer at VFA-203.

This incident was one of four in about a 12-month period. The scenario is similar to the events reported in the others—an unattended vehicle somehow rolled into an aircraft. The advice offered in this article is on the nose. A few simple steps will prevent any repeats. For more photos of vehicles vs. airplanes, visit our website at www.safetycenter.navy.mil, click on Mech (under the media department), and click on Mech Photo Gallery.—Ed.